



J. MARION SIMS, 1813 - 1883

Photograph from the collection of Arthur Reich, M.D.

THE INFLUENCE OF J. MARION SIMS ON GYNECOLOGY*

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GYNECOLOGY as a surgical specialty may be said to have had its beginnings when in 1809 Ephraim McDowell performed the first successful ovariectomy and when in 1849 J. Marion Sims opened up the field of vaginal plastic surgery with his work on vesico-vaginal fistula. It is the purpose of this paper to describe briefly Sims' pioneer achievements in surgery and to trace his influence on gynecology down to the present day. The temptation is great to stray from my assigned topic into the byways of biography for the story of Sims' life is a fascinating one. But it is a tale often told, by Sims in his autobiography, and by many others. Especially noteworthy is the delightful monograph by James Pratt Marr which appeared in 1949.

Gynecology was in a sad state in the first half of the Nineteenth

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Century with the "pessary school" in the ascendancy. It was said that two fortunes were easily made in gynecology—one by those who inserted pessaries, and the other by those who removed them. The term gynecology was not used until 1847. The family doctor who treated diseases of women was "doing nothing with a deal of skill." Women were exceedingly modest with the result that an adequate examination was seldom made and there was little understanding of the nature of diseases of the reproductive organs. In 1854, Charles D. Meigs, Professor of Obstetrics and Diseases of Women and Children at the Jefferson Medical College, had "urged as a valid objection to gynecological examinations the likelihood of inducing a lax moral sense in the patient."

Sims states in his autobiography that if there was anything he hated it was investigating the organs of the female pelvis. During his first ten years of practice he never pretended to treat any of the diseases of women, referring them elsewhere.

Sims' first achievement was the cure of vesico-vaginal fistula. His accidental discovery of the value of the knee-elbow position in obtaining the necessary exposure for a surgical attack on the lesion and his invention of the vaginal speculum which bears his name, were the first steps taken on the road to success. Beginning in 1845, Sims spent four years attempting to close a fistula, operating on three patients some 40 times. Finally, he hit upon the use of silver wire as suture material. Success came in June, 1849, when Sims finally cured a patient he had operated on 30 times. His classic paper *On the Treatment of Vesico-Vaginal Fistula* was published in *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* in 1852. The author described what he believed he had originated: the position of the patient for the operation, the speculum, the means of vivifying the edges of the fistulous opening, the suture apparatus, and the catheter. He reviewed the work of others, notably Jobert of France and in this country, Hayward, Pancoast and Mettauer. All had succeeded in curing a few cases of vesico-vaginal fistula and Mettauer had used lead sutures.

Actually none of Sims' innovations were exactly new. As Marr points out, his great achievement was "that of perfecting and popularizing a technique which was simple in principle and more nearly universally applicable than any technique previously devised."

The Sims operation for vesico-vaginal fistula is by no means outdated. According to J. Chassar Moir of Oxford, as late as 1916 Herbert

Spencer, the foremost exponent of Sims' method in Great Britain, repeatedly succeeded in effecting a cure by the simple procedure of paring the edges of the fistula and drawing them together with silver wire. He succeeded even in patients who had been subjected to previous operations by other methods. Moir in 1940 stated that he always used Sims' semi-prone position and silver wire.

In *The American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* for March, 1956, there is a valuable article by J. C. Moir entitled *Personal Experiences in the Treatment of Vesico-Vaginal Fistula*. He writes that it was the challenge of vesico-vaginal fistula that, in large measure established gynecology as a specialty and provided the stimulus for the creation of the earliest gynecological hospitals.

Moir states that at one time, in accordance with the Marion Sims tradition, he employed silver wire and was well pleased with the results. In his opinion the most serviceable retractor is a medium or small-sized Sims speculum. It is interesting that at this late date Moir finds it necessary in his conclusions to caution: "don't despair of local closure of a vesico-vaginal fistula."

The only advance made since the introduction of Sims' techniques has been the separation of the bladder from the vaginal mucosa and the suturing of each as an individual layer. The flap-splitting operation was devised by Colles of Dublin in 1857 and developed by Mackenrodt in 1894.

The second great achievement of J. Marion Sims was the founding of the Woman's Hospital in the State of New York in 1855. This unique institution, the first hospital in the world for the treatment of the diseases of women, was the second great influence which Sims exerted in the development of the specialty. Here over the past century many of the leaders received their training and advanced gynecology by numerous contributions.

During the Civil War, Sims spent six years abroad where he was warmly received by the leading members of the profession. One result of Sims' voluntary exile was the opportunity it gave him to find the time to produce his one book on the subject of gynecology, *Clinical Notes on Uterine Surgery; with Special Reference to the Management of the Sterile Condition*. First appearing serially in the *Lancet* in 1864 and 1865, it was published in book form in 1866. Editions of the book were printed simultaneously in London, New York, Paris, and Erlangen,

Germany. Sims did not claim to have written a systematic work, nevertheless it established his reputation as the leading gynecologist in the world and was another great step forward in making gynecology a surgical specialty.

Sims was severely criticized for his frankness about the treatment of sterility. He was many years ahead of his contemporaries in advocating the use of the microscope as an aid in the diagnosis and treatment of sterility. He outraged his Victorian readers by his description of post-coital examination of the sperm and his use of artificial insemination. *The Medical Times and Gazette* of London expressed "an unfeigned regret that Dr. Marion Sims had thought proper to found an odious style of practice on such methods. Better let ancient families become extinct than keep up the succession by such means."

In numerous papers, Sims advanced the growth of the specialty. He contributed to the surgery of prolapse of the uterus, advocated hysterectomy for bleeding fibroids, urged the "extirpation of the cancerous uterus" as the only means of curing uterine malignancy. Deeply interested in the whole problem of cancer, he urged the establishment of a hospital for the exclusive treatment of the condition. His plea was largely influential in founding the New York Cancer Hospital, now the Memorial Hospital.

But Sims did not confine himself to pelvic surgery alone; he was a pioneer in the surgery of the abdomen along with Lawson Tait and Joseph Price. At the age of 68, Sims made his last great contribution. It was based on his experiences at the battle of Sedan in 1870 while serving as chief surgeon of the Anglo-American Ambulance Corps. The mortality from gunshot wounds of the abdomen was 100 per cent at that time. In what proved to be his valedictory address, delivered before The New York Academy of Medicine on October 6, 1881, he pleaded for the immediate exploration of the abdomen in suspected perforation of the bowel, hemorrhage from ectopic pregnancy and other intra-abdominal accidents. In the discussion which followed, his views were considered too radical. Yet in little more than a decade Sims' forecast of the surgery of the future was widely accepted.

J. Marion Sims died at the age of 70 on November 13, 1883. The founder of gynecology left a name, which in the words of the poet, was:

*"One of the few, the immortal names,
That were not born to die."*